

by Ashley Bliss
Women's Rural
Entrepreneurial
Network



Mavra Adams of Almost Edible Soaps in
St. Johnsbury, Vermont, with an admirer.

The Rural Entrepreneur Overcoming Isolation

All entrepreneurs need certain core tools for success. A business plan, for instance, is essential for sharpening goals and providing a road map to the future. But for people living in rural areas, the difficulties of creating a viable business are often more complex than for other entrepreneurs.

Women's Rural Entrepreneurial Network was begun in 1994 by three women in the North Country who worked with unemployed low-income women on welfare and who saw a need for more job opportunities.

Many of the unique rural challenges can be traced to one factor: isolation. Regardless of a rural microbusiness owner's region, state, or town, sparse population is a serious barrier to success. She will struggle to find markets that barely exist, she will attempt to engage a customer base half an hour or more away, and she will feel very alone in an economic landscape that may have been in decline for decades.

For some workers in rural areas, where salaries are not usually high, starting a business on the side is essential to supporting the family, and patching incomes together is common. For others, entrepreneurship is a way of breaking the cycle of poverty in what is often a minimum-wage, service-based local economy.

Entrepreneurship can be self-empowering. The task for organizations engaged in rural microenterprise development, then, is to foster that sense of empowerment.

Holistic Assistance

Much traditional entrepreneurial support is based on a model emphasizing technical assistance or training. Although flexibility has gradually increased, it is not uncommon for entrepreneurs to be put through a predetermined program from which they graduate after a year and be sent off to run a business.

The focus of traditional programs is on marketing, cash flow, financial acumen, business plans, and other such practicalities. Rural businesspeople need more. Many benefit most from a multidimensional

relationship with the organizations that serve them. They prefer an array of course options, and they appreciate being encouraged to think about their *whole* selves.

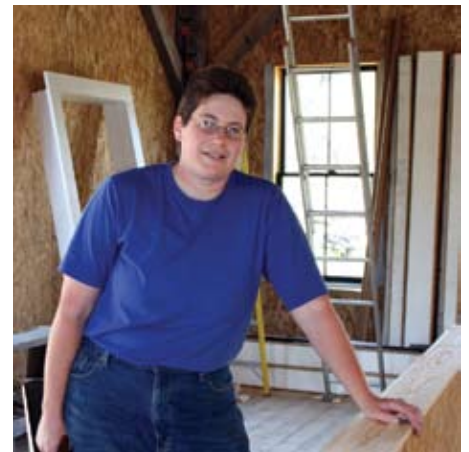
At least, that is the experience of the Women's Rural Entrepreneurial Network (WREN), a microenterprise development organization in New Hampshire's White Mountains that assists rural businesses—350 businesses so far. WREN has gone farther than most in offering course flexibility. Members choose only the portions of the entrepreneurial curriculum best suited to developing their particular business; and all programs are self-directed and short-term.¹ One advantage of this approach is that it reduces costs and travel over long rural distances—and cuts time spent away from the running of a business.

WREN was begun in 1994 by three women in the North Country who worked with unemployed low-income women on welfare and who saw a need for more job opportunities. At the time, the options were seasonal and service-based jobs or high-stress nurses' aide positions. Many low-income women feared taking such jobs and losing the state assistance and child-care benefits that they needed to make ends meet. A training program to teach them how to be successful entrepreneurs seemed logical, and with a small grant, the WREN pilot program was started in Littleton, New Hampshire.

After the first year, 12 new woman-owned businesses were up and running, and by 1997, WREN had become a flourishing

membership organization, with annual dues of \$12 to support activities. It has continued to grow to 550 members in 13 states—both supporters and active participants.

As WREN expanded, it moved to the neighboring town of Bethlehem, purchasing and renovating two storefronts on Main Street. The headquarters site includes offices, a technology center, and a basement space for photo shoots. WREN has plans to purchase an additional building with incubator space and more retail footage. The empty lot next door will be converted into an outdoor marketplace.



Sally Fishburn runs her woodworking business, S.A. Fishburn, Inc., out of Danville, Vermont.

The move to Bethlehem got WREN thinking about microenterprise development in the larger framework of rural economic development, and it began to work with the town's revitalization organizations to uplift Main Street businesses. The efforts created a welcoming atmosphere for visitors, and through collaborations with local arts organizations, the creative economy got a boost.

Reaching the Market

Isolation makes market access a constant challenge for rural business owners, so organizations helping them need to go beyond standard marketing lessons.

One idea is to operate a retail store, such as WREN's wrenOVATION, where 154 artisans currently sell their wares. Another idea is a fine art gallery for individual and group shows by organization members. At WREN, having a store and gallery has generated more than half a million dollars in income, with 60 percent going directly to the entrepreneurs.

Other ideas for helping people in remote areas to access markets include: working with the state on getting broadband access; building an online business directory where members can post a business description, contact information, and a photo; and creating online or print publications for members to write articles or tip columns to attract customers.



Becca Van Fleet of Becca Van Fleet Pottery in Eaton, New Hampshire, has built her business with the help of the Women's Rural Entrepreneurial Network.

Partnering with the funding community on innovative programs for microentrepreneurs is also key. For example, WREN has worked with Women and Company, a division of Citigroup, in a national program that creates small equity awards for microentrepreneurs. Applicants are required to submit in-depth proposals that include specific project goals and outcomes, a complete budget, and a work plan. In the first year, WREN made nine \$1,000 equity awards; in the second year, it made 10, in amounts

between \$500 and \$2,500. It also tracked how the cash circulated and found that \$7,500 of the \$10,000 awarded ended up in the community.

Other partnerships include working with the Small Business Development Corporation on helping clients to get access to banks and with MicroCredit-NH on a peer-lending program.



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Yoga and Beyond

To improve the overall quality of life and reduce isolation for rural entrepreneurs, it is also useful to let the entrepreneurs teach and take classes that are not necessarily related to running a business. WREN has several personal-development options, including yoga and aromatherapy. The gallery receptions, holiday parties, and brown bag lunches also provide opportunities for people to connect and feel less isolated.

In WREN's experience, the rural business owners most likely to have long-term success are not always the ones with the most developed marketing plans or even the strongest bottom lines. They often are the ones with the healthiest outlook on their lives and on their livelihoods. Hence the key

to successfully fostering entrepreneurship in rural regions is to use a multifaceted approach. Groups that do so not only help their members but also serve the broader goal of uplifting rural regions and economies.

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Portrait photography in this article by Meghan Hamilton, Rodeo & Co. Photography.

Endnote

¹ Technology classes include introductory and advanced classes in Microsoft Office, elements of graphic design, introductory and advanced PhotoShop, how to use a digital camera, how to edit photos, and how to use a scanner, a photo printer, and other hardware, as well as one-to-one project-oriented trainings. Business classes include cash flow analysis, beginning bookkeeping skills, and budgeting. Marketing classes help members tackle challenges peculiar to rural areas. There are also in-depth seminars on Internet marketing. Other course options include introductory html, how to create business cards and brochures, and public speaking.

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www.bethlehemcolonial.org

The Colonial Theatre, the nation's oldest continuously operating movie house, found new life through a partnering of WREN and the Bethlehem Redevelopment Association, becoming a regional cultural center.